A Companion to Italian Cinema
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A Companion to Italian Cinema

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Frank Burke

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In Memoriam, Peter Brunette, 1943–2010

To Tyler, Wylie, and Gabe
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First of all, I must thank the contributors who have been there from the start for their patience with the preparation of this volume which, beginning with Peter Brunette’s death, encountered a series of obstacles and delays. And for those who joined along the way, many thanks for your willingness to participate.

Emilia Griffin provided excellent translations for the Italian-language essays, and Zipporah Weisberg offered timely and enthusiastic copyediting support. Since virtually all the contributors offered invaluable advice regarding potential new contributors and/or priceless input on contemporary issues in Italian cinema studies, I refer the reader to the “Notes on Contributors” for my thanks on these matters! However, I will single out those who were called upon and responded well above the norm: Marguerite Waller, Millicent Marcus, Louis Bayman, Chris Wagstaff, Alan O’Leary, Tiziana Ferrero-Regis, Áine O’Healy, Stefania Parigi, Barbara Corsi, and Peter Bondanella. Catherine O’Rawe, though unfortunately not a contributor, always heeded pleas for help.

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I also thank Annette Burfoot who helped make it possible for me to live in Italy for extended periods of time, an experience that made my editorship of this volume feasible. The Department of Film and Media, Queen’s University, supported my spending significant time “off world.” University Research Services at Queen’s helped support the costs of translation for this project.
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Editor’s Notes

It is the practice in this volume to provide English film titles, normally in parentheses, only when films have formally acquired such titles, for purposes of exhibition, distribution, and so on. The goal is to indicate to the reader the existence of an English version. To avoid misleading the reader in this regard, when there is only an Italian title, no parenthetical translation is provided. There is one group of exceptions, in an instance in which the meaning of several Italian titles is crucial, and the exceptions are signaled and explained.

Translations, unless otherwise noted, are the authors’ with the exception of the chapters by Aprà, Corsi, Lischi, Parigi, Uva, and Vanelli. They have been translated in their entirety by Emilia Griffin.

For English titles of films, I follow recent Criterion Collection releases when they represent an improvement over previous titling. For example, Vittorio de Sica’s *Ladri di biciclette* (1948) had usually been translated into English in the singular—*The Bicycle Thief*—despite the significantly plural Italian. Criterion has chosen the more appropriate *Bicycle Thieves*. Similarly, though less significantly, Roberto Rossellini’s *Roma città aperta* (1945) has been referred to as just *Open City* or as *Rome, Open City*. Criterion has kept “Rome” and deleted the unnecessary comma: *Rome Open City*. My sense is that these recent alterations will soon become standard.
The following are terms that recur throughout the volume or within the Glossary and that, while familiar to those working in Italian film studies, might not be to the general reader. They are often contextualized within the body of the chapters in which they occur, but I have glossed the terms to avoid the repeated use of explanatory endnotes when they are not. The glossary is not meant to comprise an exhaustive list of significant terms in the study of Italian culture; it is volume-specific. The explications remain brief when the full significance of the terms becomes clear in the chapters that reference them.

**divismo/Divismo.** Small “d” divismo refers to Italian stardom as a whole. Capital “D” Divismo refers to the historically specific phenomenon of Italian silent film stardom, focusing on the diva film and female actresses of the period. The “diva film” refers to a genre of films made in Italy, from 1913 to the mid-1920s, featuring the most popular actresses of the day. (Gloss adapted from Reich’s article in this volume.)

**anni di piombo.** The translation of the title of Margarethe Von Trotta’s film Die bleierne Zeit (Marianne and Juliane, 1981), and rendered somewhat awkwardly in English as “the leaden years,” “the years of lead,” or “the years of the bullet” (bullets being colloquially associated with “lead”). The phrase refers to a period of violence and tension in Italy from the late 1960s to the beginning of the 1980s. The most notable originating event of the anni di piombo was the bombing in Piazza Fontana, Milan, December 12, 1969, by neofascists. It is a period marked by left-wing terrorism but also by the “strategy of tension” (see entry below) in which right-wing violence sought to disguise itself as left-wing terrorism in the interests of promoting an authoritarian mood and reaction in Italy. The Piazza Fontana bombing was an important instance of the strategy of tension.

**Il Boom.** See miracolo economico.

**Christian Democrats (CD).** See “DC.”

**cinema carino.** A style of Italian filmmaking of the 1980s and 1990s that was criticized for its retreat from serious or complex issues and for being superficial, unambitious, unchallenging, crowd-pleasing, and televisual. Rather than being simply critiqued, cinema carino is contextualized in Ferrero-Regis’s chapter.
cinepanettoni. Highly successful comedies released annually at Christmas time (panettone is a traditional Italian Christmas cake) that deal with the “average Italian” on holiday in various foreign locations. The subgenre began in 1983 with Carlo Vanzina’s Vacanze di Natale.

“Clean Hands” investigations. See mani puliti.

commedia all’italiana. A genre of sophisticated and often quite serious “comedies,” normally considered to originate with I soliti ignoti (Big Deal on Madonna Street, Mario Monicelli, 1958). It paralleled the success of the Italian art film, though with less international exposure, into the 1970s. It was known for its critical view of the effects of the economic miracle and of “the Italian character,” but also criticized for being complicit in the creation of a rogues gallery of figures who were too entertaining and even charming to be the vehicle for bona fide social critique.

DC. La Democrazia Cristiana, Christian Democrats. The conservative ruling party in Italy from the early postwar to the early 1990s. Supported by the Catholic Church and buttressed by Cold War aid from the United States in its rise to power, the party lost its hold on the electorate and dissolved as the result of the mani puliti investigations of the early 1990s—which revealed widespread corruption—and of Mafia investigations that revealed a history of unsavory associations. Its conservatism extended to its film legislation in the early postwar, and to its discouragement of neorealism.

economic miracle. See miracolo economico.

EUR. The initials stand for Esposizione Universale Roma. It was an area of Rome intended for the site of the 1942 world’s fair and to celebrate 20 years of Fascism. Because of the war, it did not serve its original purpose, but construction resumed in the 1950s and 1960s, and major sites were completed for the 1960 Rome Olympics. Cinematic imagery of the EUR district often conveys a sense of sterile Fascist modernity, though the history of the area’s postwar development has given it a significant post-Fascist identity as well.

FIAT strike, 1980. Defeat of this workers’ strike in 1980 is often seen as a pivotal moment in the decline of the workers’ movement, and workers’ power in Italy. Parallel moments in terms of the weakening of unions were the failed air traffic controllers’ strike in 1981 in the United States and the failed coal miners’ strike in the United Kingdom in 1984–1985.

filone/filoni. A filone is a series of spin-offs, exploiting the success of an initial film, that never attains the formal status of a genre, partly because it exploits and assimilates other filoni, as well as settings, timeframes, and stories that diverge markedly from the filone’s point of origin. The peplum (see below) is the classic example, unified only by the presence of a strongman hero, operating in a host of different contexts and historical periods as it moves from one film to the next.

fotoromanzi. Comics illustrated with photographs rather than drawings, shot on a set, with actors who become known and “fan”tasized by the public. A kind of static film. The content was principally romantic and the intended audience was primarily female.

giallo. The term derives from the yellow covers on paperback translations of crime and thriller novels published by Mondadori beginning in 1929. In a film context, it refers to an Italian filone that emerged in the 1960s, often combining mystery, crime, and horror with graphic and lurid imagery, associated initially with directors such as Mario Bava and Dario Argento.
**Glossary**

**fumetti.** Italian comics. “Fumetti” means little puffs of smoke, which is the Italian way of expressing what, in English would be the “balloons” in which text appears.

**impegno.** Sociopolitical commitment. A cinema of impiego is dedicated to exploring political issues, events, consequences, and so on. In an Italian context, this was traditionally assumed to imply a Marxist perspective, though there are many Italian films that offer political analysis without a governing Marxist agenda.

**Hollywood on the Tiber.** A term first employed by the American press, in conjunction with the production of *Quo Vadis* (Mervyn Leroy, 1951), to describe the arrival of Hollywood filmmaking in Rome and at Cinecittà film studios. *Quo Vadis* was the first of the numerous major Hollywood film productions made in Italy in the 1950s and 1960s to be considered part of this phenomenon.

**mani puliti.** The term means “clean hands” and refers to investigations that began in February 1992 and revealed widespread corruption in the Italian political establishment, leading to the eventual demise of all four political parties in power at the time, including the Christian Democrat party. This political meltdown came to be considered the fall of “the First Republic”: that is, the republic inaugurated through referendum in the immediate postwar. The network of corruption acquired the name *tangentopoli* (“Bribe City,” “Bribesville”), originally referring to Milan, where corruption was first identified, but eventually referring to the entire nationwide expanse of bribes and corruption.

**Mezzogiorno.** Name, meaning “midday,” given to the South of Italy in reference to the heat of the midday sun.

**miracolo economico/Economic Miracle/Il boom.** A period of strong economic and technological development, centered in the years 1958–1963, that transformed Italian society largely along the lines of American capitalism and consumerism, in ways often critiqued in films of the late 1950s and beyond.

**PCI.** Partito Comunista Italiano. The Italian Communist Party.

**peplum.** The 1950s to 1960s low-budget Italian sword-and-sandal film, and the first of the filoni. This filone was named “peplum” by French critics for the Greco–Roman attire of the films’ characters. At the start, it featured mythological strongmen such as Hercules, played by American bodybuilders such as Steve Reeves, in stories that played fast and loose with Greek and Roman myth. The first, *Le fatiche di Ercole* (*Hercules*, Pietro Francisci, 1958), spawned 200 films in a 7-year period, if we restrict the spin-offs largely to Greco–Roman myth, (pseudo) Greco-Roman history, and stories of Christianity emerging in the Roman Empire. This already impressive number swells to over 300 if we include swashbuckler/pirate, barbarian/Viking, and exotic Eastern variations.

**poliziesco/poliziottesco.** The term “poliziottesco” was a pejorative term for films considered to be lowbrow capitalizations on a more “dignified” tradition of the “poliziesco” or police/crime story. The latter enjoyed the status of a genre, while the former was relegated to a filone. As the two chapters (Fisher’s and Uva’s) in this volume indicate, either term can be used in such a way as to contest the low-brow/high-brow dichotomy.

**Racial Laws.** Discriminatory legislation, passed by the Fascist government between 1938 and 1943, and aimed principally at Italian Jews and the inhabitants of the Italian colonies: Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Libya.
Rai. (Rai1, Rai2, Rai3). Radiotelevisione Italiana Rai—the national Italian broadcaster.

riflusso. A period of retreat from political engagement in 1980s Italy, following the political activism but also terrorism and right-wing violence of the preceding decades.

sceneggiate. Stage and cinema dramatizations of vernacular songs. Used in reference to films accompanied by music in the silent era but also for certain forms of theatre and film spectacle (e.g., the sceneggiata napoletana) in the sound era.

The “southern question.” First posed by Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci, the term addresses structural and ideological differences between northern and southern Italy that have tended to maintain the latter in a position of subalternity. The southern question also encompasses the matter of “false difference”—that is, the prejudicial comparison of North and South always to the detriment of the latter and often in such terms as “backwardness” and “lawlessness.” Recent developments around the southern question emphasize specificities, not comparative differences, acknowledging the fact that there are many diverse Souths.

strategy of tension. Term used to indicate terrorist actions perpetrated, during the anni di piombo, by neofascist and paramilitary groups and blamed on the left wing in order to incite a coup d’état or a strong move to authoritarianism.

tangentopoli. See mani puliti.

trasformismo. The practice of ruling politicians to seek a stable majority by patronage rather than through ideological solidarity, staying in power and avoiding crises by deal-making that forecloses discussion of major issues and promotes the repeated compromise of principles.

varietà. Variety shows that had certain similarities to music-hall entertainment (Great Britain) or vaudeville (North America), though with great regional variations, dependent on local traditions, in Italy.

ventennio. The 20-year (venti means “twenty” in Italian) period of Fascist rule, which actually extended slightly beyond 20 years, 1922–1943.

white-telephone films. Socially conservative films of the Fascist era representing well-to-do protagonists in a mise-en-scène that invariably included the status symbol of white telephones.
Preface and In Memoriam

In a sense, this project initiated for me in January 2009, when I received a request from Jayne Fargnoli, executive editor at Wiley-Blackwell, to referee a proposal by Peter Brunette for a Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Italian Cinema. The request precipitated a pleasant exchange of emails with Jayne. Peter, being Peter, had written a stunning proposal, and I responded to it enthusiastically. However, I referred to the volume as a Cambridge, rather than Wiley-Blackwell, Companion, an error I repeated even when I first took the project on myself: the first of my many challenges to Jayne’s boundless patience and good humor.

Then came the shock of Peter’s death on June 16, 2010. He was in Sicily, and I was in Lucca (Tuscany), which echoed the distance/closeness dynamic of our relationship noted below. Once some of the shock wore off—a good part of it never will—I remembered his proposal and my enjoyable correspondence with Jayne. I contacted her and asked if there was anything I could do to help keep the project alive. Bringing the Companion to fruition seemed an appropriate way to honor the companion whom I and so many others had just lost. Jayne and I both had quite similar responses to Peter’s death and a similar desire to make the volume happen, so I ended up taking on the editorial responsibility.

Peter had made numerous initial contacts, and the participation of many of the contributors is his doing. Over time, there were sufficient changes in the composition of the volume that its organization and foci became my doing. For this reason, it has made sense to designate it the work of a single editor, rather than a coedited project. But it is, to me, very much a shared enterprise, infused with Peter’s spirit. Most important, without his initiative it would not have come to be. And, of course, the time-honored disclaimer in these instances applies: the virtues of the volume lie with him, its failings with me.

Peter was a great friend whom I encountered in mid career and hardly ever saw. Paradoxical. We first met at an American Association for Italian Studies conference in Utah in the late 1980s or early 1990s. In conjunction with the publication and presentation of his book on Roberto Rossellini, Peter brought to the event Ingrid Rossellini, daughter of Roberto Rossellini and Ingrid Bergman, twin sister of Isabella Rossellini, and an Italian scholar in her own right. A small group, including Peter and Ingrid, convened in my hotel room till late at night. The memory is so vivid that I relive it, as I write, with startling concreteness. I remember Peter making a very kind comment in response to my
presentation on Fellini, despite the fact that he considered il maestro “a wanker.” His generosity of spirit and choice of words stayed with me.

The next time we met, he and I sat next to each other as we were being bussed from one conference venue to another, and our relatively brief conversation formed a bond that endured till his passing. We found ourselves talking about deeply personal matters in a context of complete trust.

We didn’t see each other again or even communicate until 2003, when we both attended the Felliniana conference at the University of Washington. As we dined together one evening, it became clear there that our bonding had much to do with similar backgrounds. We were both of US urban east-coast origin and both the product of Catholic upbringing and education. We also shared an interest in sports as well as European cinema.

In 2006, Peter brought me on board to do the commentary with him for the Criterion release of Fellini’s Amarcord. The commentary confirmed our seamless compatibility; we spent many enjoyable hours in New York City, and we talked of writing a book together on 1960s Italian film. I was happy when Peter mentioned that our work on the commentary tempted him to rethink his opinion of Fellini.

After that, it was occasional emailing, because he was so often on the move at film festivals and similar events, and I was in Canada. But by then, losing touch with Peter seemed like a foreign concept: we didn’t need incidental communication to sustain our camaraderie.

Little did I know that a radical losing of touch was on the horizon. Fortunately, Peter left behind a legacy of wonderful work to keep him perennially present. And this Companion has been a vital means for me to maintain a strong sense of connection and continuity. Still, his loss will always be as deeply felt as his friendship.

I would be remiss to focus solely on my fondness for Peter and fail to mention his importance as a scholar. He was a major figure in Italian and international film studies. He was eclectic, cosmopolitan, dedicated, and tireless. His work was scrupulously researched and informed by the latest theoretical methods and approaches. He did a great service to film studies by bringing Derridean deconstruction to an otherwise resistant discipline. His work on Pasolini and Antonioni remains particularly important to me, but he also ranged far afield of Italian studies with his important publications on François Truffaut, Michael Haneke, and Wong Kar-wai, among others.

It was always amazing to me that Peter managed to write as many books as he did, when he spent so much time on the road serving as a festival reporter and contributor for outlets such as The Hollywood Reporter and Indiewire. However, his travels insured that his writing was the product of his experience, not just of isolated research and contemplation. The richness of his life was reflected in the richness of his work.

Peter’s immense sociability is reflected in this Companion, which brings together so many of his friends and colleagues to celebrate Italian cinema and, implicitly, Peter’s role in its academic appreciation and diffusion.
Part I
First Things